

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL TOM JAMES, COMMANDER, 4TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: THE PROGRESS OF THE IRAQI SECURITY FORCES TIME: 2:00 P.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 14, 2008

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):1 And with that, I'd like to say hello and welcome everybody to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, August 14th. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today. And as a note for the bloggers on the line, please state your name and the organization or blog that you represent.

And our guest today is Colonel Tom James. He is with the commander -- excuse me -- commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, who's currently deployed to central Iraq. He's going to talk about a myriad of topics. And rather than go into all of them, I'm going to turn it over to the colonel so he can go ahead and explain that, and then we'll go into the questions. Sir, the floor is yours.

COL. JAMES: Okay, thank you, Jennifer. I appreciate it.

And good afternoon to all. I'm Colonel Tom James, commander of the 4th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. And we are positioned or headquartered at FOB Kasul, which is in MND, Multinational Division- Central, about 50 kilometers south of Baghdad. And what I'd like to do is start with a quick statement, and then I'll get to your questions.

First of all, first a quick orientation to our operating environment. We're in Babil Province, which is located 50 kilometers south of Baghdad on the key avenues of approach into the capital city. The population is estimated to be 1.2 million Iraqis, and that's 75 percent Shi'a and 25 percent Sunni. The majority of the Sunni population resides in the northern portion of the province, in and around the towns of Jurpasucor (sp) and Iskandariyah.

Currently the majority of our combat brigade is positioned in North Babel, but we maintain a military transition team further south in the provincial capital of Hillah. We are partnered with the 31st Iraqi Army Brigade and the Babil police throughout the province.

Our mission is to secure the population, defeat extremists and neutralize resistance groups, increase the professionalism of the Iraqi Security Forces, build the capacity of government institutions and economic programs, and

transition security and local development tasks to the Iraqi Security Forces and local governments over time.

The essential point that I'd like to make for you today is this. The population feels secure and the quality of life is improving. There are two main reasons for this current condition. First, the Iraqi Security Forces have improved significantly, and, in partnership with coalition forces, have drastically improved the overall security situation in Babil Province. Second, the improved security has enabled positive growth in governance and economic systems, creating tangible improvements in the daily lives of the Babil citizens.

As stated earlier, the population of Babil Province is mostly Shi'a, and a significant Sunni minority population located in the northern portion of the province. The majority of the al Qaeda and Jaish al-Islami threat is in north Babil, and the majority of the Jaish al-Mahdi, or special groups, or what we also refer to military extremists -- correction; militia extremists -- is located in the central and southern part of Babil.

Over the past year, the security situation has improved significantly. Attacks in July of last year averaged eight per day. Now attacks are down to less than two per week. Security improvements are based on three key factors: First, a highly professional and greatly improved Iraqi Security Force; second, the Sons of Iraq program; and third, combined security forces -- that is, Iraqi Security Forces and coalition forces living with the population on distributed patrol basis in joint security stations.

The Iraqi Security Forces have made enormous progress in Babil Province. Brigadier General Abdul Amir and the 31st Iraqi Army Brigade routinely conduct precise intelligence-based operations. They are responsible for defeating al Qaeda and Jaish al-Mahdi special groups in several locations throughout the province. They conducted numerous operations to defeat al Qaeda in the Obeidi region south of Baghdad. And during the Jaish al-Mahdi uprising in March of this year, they decisively defeated JAM in Hillah and several other towns in central and southern Babil Province.

As a result, the people of Babil trust the 31st Brigade to provide security. General Abdul Amir also has a strong relationship with the Babil chief of police and the Babil police force. The police continue to improve and play a positive role in providing security as well.

The Sons of Iraq program are also another stabilizing force in north Babil. We employ just over 9,500 SOIs who man static checkpoints to thicken security lines between the Iraqi army and the police positions in the cities.

The third factor in the improvement of the security situation is the fact that Iraqi Security Forces and their coalition partners, us, are forward-deployed and living with the population in patrol bases and joint security stations. This persistent presence of these security forces highlight to the people that the ISF is committed to their security, and it stimulates human intelligence and productive economic activity.

As a result of the positive security situation, we are seeing an increase in governance proficiency and economic productivity. Within the last three months, the governor, the provincial council leaders and directors general have traveled to north Babil, a feat that was inconceivable a year ago.

We also see an increase in government-sponsored projects in the central services. There are currently 186 Government of Iraq- sponsored projects in north Babil. These projects are an enormous sign of progress, because at this time last year, when I was here for PDSS, GOI-funded projects were virtually nonexistent.

We still have work to do in the areas of security, water flow, clean water and agricultural initiatives. But with a newly formed connection between local and provincial government, such improvements are achievable.

We're focused on several key tasks as we look to the future: First, successful execution of free, fair and safe elections; second, GOI-driven Sons of Iraq transition to other productive employment, because we know this program won't last forever; third, assisting with professionalization of the Iraqi Security Forces; fourth, assisting with local economic development to create employment opportunity; and fifth, we have to adjust some basing of the Iraqi army and police within Babil Province.

Overall, we are extremely optimistic about the security situation in Babil Province because of the professional actions of the Iraqi Security Forces and the population's strong desire for peace and security. We believe these conditions will stimulate positive governance and economic growth for the future and eventually result in irreversible sustainable security.

I cannot close without mentioning the superb work by our outstanding soldiers and the sacrifices of their wonderful families. Their ability to adapt rapidly to extremely complex situations never cease to amaze us.

I thank you very much, and I am now prepared to answer your questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir, for going through that.

A number of people joined us when the Colonel was speaking. Can you let me know who that was?

Q (Inaudible.  
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LT. CRAGG: Okay, you'll be number four.

Who else?

Q Bruce McLain.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Bruce, you'll be number five. I don't know who came -- did you come right after Jared, Bruce?

Q I was probably the last one.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Roger that.

Okay, Grim, let's go ahead and go with you. You were the first on the line.

Q Yes, ma'am. This is Grim of Blackfive.net.

Colonel, I want to ask you for an update on north Babil Province specifically, particularly Iskandariyah. It's been about a year since bad elements within the Iskandariyah police were involved in the assassination of their own mayor, as you know. And it was that incident that shamed the Iskan police into trying to purge their bad elements and enter into a new partnership with the coalition. It wasn't long after that that General Qais, the police chief for Babil Province generally and a great Iraqi patriot, was killed in another assassination.

So I'd like to know how the police in Iskandariyah are doing. How are they dealing with the provincial police? How is General Qais's replacement doing? You know, the police level of the ISF in north Babil is what I'm asking about generally.

COL. JAMES: Absolutely. The Iskandariyah police are improving. And as you mentioned, General Qais, who was the PDOP when we first got here, and for the first -- well, for about a month we were in position here before he was killed -- and was a true patriot, believed in what all was right about Iraq. And we had a great working relationship with him. We have transitioned to the new PDOP, police chief, Major General Fadhel Raddad. And he is doing a great job. He does not have the experience that Qais had, and is continuing to develop over time. And the more we work with him, the more impressed we are with his ability to adjust to the changing situation in security throughout Babil Province.

But if we drill down into Iskandariyah, Iskandariyah has been -- the security situation has significantly improved there. Specifically related to Shi'a extremists, there have been proactive operations by the police and the Iraqi army that have targeted Shi'a extremists and special groups in that area, which have reduced the threat significantly. And we've been able to see some of the progress of that related to the Iskandariyah industrial complex, where we have gone from roughly 800 employees now to almost 10,000, and they're producing lots of viable equipment for the local population, and that's been a big success.

On the other hand, there has been some violence of Iskandariyah, if I can mention it. If you go back to the Arba'in observance along the routes that come down into Iskandariyah and into Karbala, there was a suicide vest attack that killed many there. There was a significant Iraqi Security Force security operation going on there, but they weren't able to cover everywhere and there was an attack there, but that was the most significant attack we had had.

But for the most part, just the other day we had a large cache that was turned in by the police. The people are more effectively coming to the police and giving them intelligence and giving them locations of equipment and bad guys, and they've been able to turn that. So it's been successful for the past 10 months that we've been here.

Q One very brief follow up, because I know we have a lot of people on the line, the Iskandariya police were having a great challenge a year ago when I was out there at integrating Sunnis into the police force, even though it's a majority Sunni part of Babil, as you know. How is that progressing?

COL. JAMES: It's up and down. You know, we have integrated Sunnis. General Ridat (sp) understands the importance of it, and obviously General Casey did, was very good at it. But we get some very strong Sunni police in the police, but sometimes they're repositioned, and there are Shi'a that come in.

So I believe that there is some improvement that needs to take place and more Sunni police in North Babil Province. And so we're working that very hard. We see some progress, but sometimes it's one stop forward and a couple steps back. So I would say it's about a moderate improvement at this point.

Q Thank you, Colonel.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go to the next person. Andrew? Q Colonel, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval Institute's Get the Gouge. How are you, sir?

COL. JAMES: Good, thanks, Andrew.

Q Good. Hey, Colonel, when you and I sat down with General Lynch back in the end of Jan., early February planning your mission in March, the general said that he was chasing, effectively, three groups around 10 people apiece. That was all the bad guys you had in your AOR. Has that number increased, declined, or is this now more of a police mission than a military mission?

COL. JAMES: The security situation has improved greatly, Andrew. It is a true good-news experience. And I think I've told you, when I was here for our pre-deployment survey about a year ago, there were eight attacks a day and now we're just down to about two per week. And we have isolated most of the extremist threat. I'll start with Sunni and then talk Shi'a. But the al Qaeda and Jaish Al-Islami threat, we have severely disrupted. I don't want to say we've defeated and broken their will so that they're no longer in our area, but most of the attacks that they've tried to accomplish in the past couple of months have been ineffective. And so we see that we have severely disrupted them, and over time here in the next several months, with the Iraqi Security Force improvement, I envision they will be defeated within North Babil.

The Shi'a extremist threat has gone down significantly as well. We had the spike in March where we had some EFP attacks and some IDF attacks on some of our locations, or indirect fire, and since then that has been almost nonexistent, and I believe that's because they tested the water with the Iraqi Security Forces in March and were significantly defeated, and so they have backed off now and withdrawn, and we see localized defeat in the areas of North Babil, based on the Iraqi Security Forces attacks on the Shi'a extremists.

So that's one part. The other part is the relationship with the population. We are seeing both the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army are really, really in favor of -- the population is in favor of what they've been able to do. And they have been able to turn over some of the key intelligence that we needed to act on, based on that relationship.

Q Well, sir, does that mean that there are less than 30 bad guys now or more than 30? Again, General Lynch quoted me three groups of 10. Has it decreased or has it increased?

COL. JAMES: It's less than 30.

Q Great. How --

COL. JAMES: Way less than 30. My guess -- if I were to -- you know, it's hard to put a number on those kinds of things because it fluctuates, but I can tell you right now, with severely disrupted, I envision that there are

probably 15 to 20 lower-level fighters that are under-resourced and under-led that are influencing North Babil, and over time we will complete their defeat. And I envision that being over the next several months.

Q Well, couldn't this then switch -- and then I'll let this go to the next group -- couldn't this switch then to a police mission than a military mission if these are just more bad guys than hard core terrorists?

COL. JAMES: You know, over time we will be able to do that. I am not comfortable doing that like right today. I am very confident in the Iraqi Security Forces, but I do believe that there still needs to be the Iraqi army involved until we can prove the defeat of extremists in North Babil. And I don't see that being far off, but some of the resources and the positioning of the Iraqi army that we'll have to do over time, I envision that we still have to do that before we can completely transition this to the police.

And, you know, another big piece of this is the Sons of Iraq program, and being able to integrate some of the Sunni Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi police to help reinforce the numbers required just to transition this to a policing function.

Q Okay, thank you very much.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go to the next one. Greg (sp)?

Q Yeah, hi, Colonel.

Greg Graham (sp) here. The North Babil area was a real Sunni hotbed for so long, many years, and I'm just curious if you could explain what your thoughts are on how the U.S. and the coalition eliminated the Sunni nationalist threat in that area. Where do you think the insurgency went? Did they all go into SOI, did they all go into jails? Were they killed? And kind of what your long-term view is for that nationalist group that used to reside in that area.

COL. JAMES: Okay, Greg, absolutely. As I think through that question, the key piece here is the Sunni-dominated North Babil area was a significant al Qaeda safe haven. A good example is Jer Fisukir (ph), the Buhairat (ph) area, the Fish Lake area just north of Jer Fisukir, and the river valley up there. That was dominated by al Qaeda. But in answer to your question, it's really all of the above. A combination of Iraqi Security Forces and coalition attacks have severely disrupted the extremists and North Babil Province.

When we did our attack -- we had our first major operation as a brigade within Task Force Marne in December. That was Operation Marne Roundup, and we attacked up the river valley to the town of Qider (ph), and in Qider was roughly 40 HUI extremists. And in that attack we envisioned, based on estimates, we killed 13, captured about 15, and the rest displaced north.

And so I think, in answer to your question, it's all of the above that you mentioned. I believe that some had decided that they have somewhat reconciled, said that it's not worth fighting anymore; the Iraqi Security Force is too strong, the fight is too tough. We're just going to try to transition in to the SIOs and reconcile. We've seen some of that. We've killed some. We've captured some. And some have repositioned to the north. But for the most part, we do not see any coherent command and control or leadership because all the leadership has either been captured, displaced and running for their lives, or been killed. So it's been a very positive story in North Babil.

Now the key is reinforcing that by pulling the leadership up to North Babil and saying, look, it's secure now; let's get the government projects going and economics going.

Q Great. How much longer are you going to be deployed in that area? Do you know your timeline? COL. JAMES: We will be here until early January. That will be a 15-month deployment for our task force.

Q And you are the last 15-month brigade; is that correct?

COL. JAMES: I'm not sure if we're the last one. I do know we're one of the last. I know we would have been the sixth brigade to transition into the surge, so we were the one brigade outside of the surge and we came in and backfilled 425 here.

Q Great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go on to Jared.

Q Yes, sir, thanks for your time. Could you talk a little -- you touched on the Sons of Iraq program and brining them into the rest of the economy, and I'd like you to spend a few moments trying to discuss -- we've heard that there are some problems with trying to get them into the different ministries -- the army, the INP. What about tech training? What about trying to get them real jobs so that when they leave they're not going to just jump sides again?

COL. JAMES: The Sons of Iraq program and transition of the Sons of Iraq is what we consider one of top key issues that we have to address as we transition our area to a follow-on force into the future of Iraq. As I said earlier, about 9,500 SOIs and the old vanguard, and the preponderance of those, are Sunni. And so we have to see how we can take them and transition them into productive off-ramps, because we know that the Sons of Iraq program will not go forever, and eventually it will be picked up by the Iraqi Security Forces -- correction, by the government of Iraq, and then go from there. So we're working that very hard.

There's several options that we're working. First off is the Iraqi Security Forces. We would like to off-ramp several thousand of the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi police. We've also had recruiting drives to transition Sons of Iraq and former experienced military folks into the Iraqi army. And so we're working that. That's one off-ramp that we're working. We're also looking at literacy. Some of them can't pass some of the requirements to get into the Iraqi Security Forces, so we continue to work that. And we're also looking at jobs in the Iskandariyah industrial complex. We're trying to leverage scrap metal production and DDR contracts to teach the SOIs a skill so that they can be hired on for more long-term deployment -- or employment, excuse me. You know, we're looking at this economic development to create jobs that will endure and last over time.

So right now we've got DDR projects; we've got nine of them -- 575 Sons of Iraq. We've got roughly 2,500 packets submitted to the minister of interior and to the reconciliation cell to get them into the Iraq Security Forces. So those just are a couple of examples. And we're also working projects -- these DDR projects are road paving, and if we can develop that skill for road paving, we can pave roads for years and years here in Iraq.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Jared, let's go ahead and go to Bruce, and then we'll wrap around one more time.

Q Hey, Colonel, Bruce McQuain from QandO.net. My question has to do more with the 186 projects from the GOI you talked about, plus your priorities of water flow and agricultural initiatives. Can you address what part your PRT/EPRTs are playing in that?

COL. JAMES: I sure can. The EPRT is a vital part of our brigade combat team -- you know, the Abn. Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team. And they're out and about really working hard with agriculture. And I'll give you a good example. We had Team Borlaug come in from Texas A&M, and they spent 30 days with our brigade combat team and our EPRT, and they traveled throughout Babil Province identifying the initiatives or the things that we need to work on to stimulate agriculture.

If I could bounce back for a second, we were talking about the SOI off-ramps in the question before this. One of the off-ramps I failed to mention was agriculture because we are an agriculture-based area. And if we can get productive agriculture going on with better seed, better irrigation, better farming equipment, better education on how to be productive with farming, we can off-ramp an enormous amount of the Sons of Iraq and those farmers that aren't involved in the SOI program, we can help stimulate that growth as well. You know, we're tucked right in here between the two rivers, so we're in a great spot for agriculture, and so we're working that hard.

Now, the 186 government projects, a good example of those is the canal cleaning. They're out working the canals now so that we can get better irrigation, better water flow to the farmers. We worked on an aquaculture initiative where we had millions of fingerlings that were delivered to the fish farmers in the Buhairat (sp), which is just to the west of Iskandariyah. And so we're seeing that, and the carp are starting to grow, and that's been an enormous success for us. And that was our EPRT in coordination with ENMA (ph) and USAID that worked the fish farming. And that required us to develop tanks to transport the fish from Hilla up into North Babil, and that's worked real well.

We've been experimenting with Iskandariyah micro-finance, that we start getting loans out to the Iraqi people to stimulate small business growth, and we really focused over the past couple of months of transitioning from quick CERP impact projects to show the fruits of our labor associated with security now to the more longer term sustainable economic solutions. And so that's a couple of key pieces I wanted to break out on the 186 -- road paving is another in the 186 and some school improvements and hospital improvements as well.

Q Thanks. LT. CRAGG: Okay, we have time for at least one, maybe possibly two, more questions. Sir, if you have -- I know your time is valuable. Do you have time for at least one or two?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, anybody? Grim, let's go and go with you and go around the horn.

Q Yes, ma'am. This is Grim with blackfive.net again. I would like to ask about -- you were talking about the fish farming. I would like to ask



about the tractor factory at the Iskandariyah industrial complex and what luck you're having using that to capitalize Iraqi agriculture.

The tractors at the Iskandariyah industrial complex have been an enormously successful program. I guess the new Highland tractors that they're assembling there, they sell out of them as soon as they can make them. And we just signed another contract for a large quantity of them. I can't remember off the top of my head the exact number, but it's been extremely successful. I can go through battlefield circulation throughout the province in helicopters and see those blue tractors out there working the land. So it has been distributed out -- we've sold them as soon as we can construct them, and so I'm seeing that as a very positive move. And they've also got some farm implements associated with the tractor to help with tilling the land, and they're also working at some irrigation-type piping and systems to help with trying to be more efficient with water as far as irrigation goes. Since there's a shortage of water in some of these areas, we want to make that more efficient.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, next go to Andrew.

Q Yes, Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. Are you paying the Sons of Iraq still, or has the government of Iraq stepped up and picked up the tab?

COL. JAMES: Sir, we're still paying the Sons of Iraq, and we will pay them throughout the end of the year here, and then we're extending the contracts out to allow us to conduct some transitions internal with the coalition force, and then I envision over time they'll be picked up some other way. But we're still paying them.

Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, after Andrew was Greg.

Q Yeah, Colonel, how many Sons of Iraq do you have in your AO? And also, how many Shi'a militia groups, if there are any, are operating in the area as well?

COL. JAMES: We have 9,471 Sons of Iraq, so just under 10,000, and a large percentage -- that's roughly 75 percent of those are Sunni, and we have a smaller percentage that are Shi'a. But they operate together, and so it's a productive operation.

And what was your other question, again? I'm sorry.

Q Do you have any active Shi'a militia groups in your area? Is that --

COL. JAMES: Oh, Shi'a militia.

Q I know you touched on it earlier, but I was just curious how much of a problem you see them --

COL. JAMES: We --

Q Go ahead. COL. JAMES: We had, in March, what I estimated to be three small Shi'a militia, Shi'a extremist cells of 5 to 10 per, but since the

operations in March and the aggressive operations of the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police, specifically -- and I don't know if these towns will mean much to you, but Al-Imam (ph), Mahuwil (ph), and the Seta Musayib (ph) area -- based on active operations in those areas, we've cleaned those up, and as I see it right now, active Shi'a militia is non-existent in North Babil.

Q Have you seen the use of the EFP -- any EFP attacks since you've been there?

COL. JAMES: We have, and the majority of those were in March or earlier. We have not seen any significant EFP attacks since March of this year.

Q Do you feel pretty confident you've taken those cells down?

COL. JAMES: We do feel good -- a couple of reasons. First off, we erode their resources. We have found several rather large caches. In one of the caches we found -- down in the Ali Ma Ma Will (ph) area we found up to 1,000 copper disks. And so that's one part of it. And the other part is we've attacked specific intelligence-based operations on the leadership of these cells, and that has been effective in taking the leadership away. And the Iraqi Security Forces have been able to execute operations, and I believe at this point in time we've either killed, captured, or they have displaced south, and a figure a very few of them want to come back up and continue to fight, just based on what happened in March.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And just to -- I'll go over to Jared -- just to give a word to Jared and Bruce, do you have any final questions for the colonel before he wraps up today?

Q One quick one. How is the interrelationship with the central authorities in Baghdad dealing with the authorities in Babil? How has that improved, if at all?

COL. JAMES: Well, sir, I see some of it. The focus of our brigade combat team is from the province level down to Akada (ph), Binahia (ph), down to the high level. So we're down to the local councils. But the way we see it is through the directors general that are at the province level that are tied to the GOI, the government of Iraq, and we have been able to pull them out to some of our areas to see some of the resources required, and we have seen a direct connection with resources coming from the government directly into North Babil, which is really a success story for us seeing that this time last year that was non-existent. So we are seeing some movement. I know that Babil has a pretty strong reputation with the ability to execute the province-level budget. It's just getting that money to the right people that need it. You know, a large part of that was spent in and around Hilla where it was secure, and now we've just got to pull that out into the areas that are now secure that weren't necessarily secure a year ago.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, final, Bruce?

Q Yeah, Colonel, a quick one. You mentioned saying EFT attacks go down. How about rocket attacks?

COL. JAMES: Rocket attacks have gone down as well. We have only had two indirect fire attacks on FOB Kalsu here where we stay since we've been here,

and they missed our patrol base, or FOB -- fort operating base -- completely. So they have been significantly reduced. The last time we had an attack was in April. And they're ineffective. They aren't able to hit the targets like they were back when 425 was here a year ago, and I attribute that to taking the rocket systems away and the leaders and the facilitators that were good at what they did either killed or captured. And so we've seen a big reduction there.

We had some indirect fire attacks in our Rio (ph) Hilla, down in the Hilla -- in the province capital. And we have conducted some Area Denial combat patrols, and as well we've fired some Area Denial artillery rounds that have cleaned that up significantly too, and we haven't had any attacks in several months.

Q        Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, sir, I think that wraps up our time for today. So I wanted to ask if you had any closing thoughts for our listening audience?

COL. JAMES: Well, I just -- just a couple of things. I just want to thank everyone for letting me be here tonight and talk to you about something that's very near and dear to my heart, and that is Task Force Vanguard. And we have roughly 3,700 soldiers in the task force that are spread throughout Babil Province, and we have some that are extended down into Najaf and Karbala, and it just never ceases to amaze me, their sacrifices for our country, for the international community and the Iraqi people to help create a secure environment so that peace can grow.

You know, it's interesting. We always talk about democratic-type governments. It's never pretty when they first start out in trying to determine how they're going to work, and we see progress. And, you know, sometimes it's not real pretty, but we're seeing lots of progress in all of the lines of operation that we're focused on. And we're extremely optimistic about the success of what we're doing, and we appreciate your support and the families of those that are back home. You know, we have lost 15 soldiers in combat action, and we pray for them and their wonderful families every day. We've had about 30 to 35 with significant life-altering injuries, but that is -- the last attack we had was over two-and-a-half months ago, and we pray every night that the security situation will continue. We have a very strong partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces, and I am extremely confident that over time they're going to take this over and be extremely successful.

Thank you very much.

LT. CRAGG: And, sir, I just want to let you know, we also broadcast this on Blog TalkRadio and we have many of our listeners who are listening to you today, and one of the listeners just wanted to say thank you for you and your troops, for all the service that you do, and he wanted to bless you and wish you safe, and thank you for defending our country. So I just wanted to pass that note on -- a listener that was listening into the call today. So I just wanted to pass that on.

COL. JAMES: Thank you. That means a lot. I appreciate it.

LT. CRAGG: And with that, that wraps it up for today's call. You can find the audio file on the bloggers' page. If you have any further questions, you can go to the episode and post them and we can pass them on to Colonel James.

With that, thank you, sir, and thank you for our listeners.

COL. JAMES: All right, thank you, ma'am.

Q Colonel, thanks very much for the time. Appreciate it.

END.